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ABSTRACT

This study tested a causal model of student college predisposition that incorporated traditional measures of influences (parents' education, income, gender, parents' expectations, grades, school activities), as well as two additional influences (first-generation status and mentoring) identified in qualitative studies of pre-college through early college experiences of minority and low-income students. Specifically, the models examined the impact on explained variance in eighth-grade students' college predisposition decisions and sought to identify patterns among the selected variables for sub-groups of students. Data for the model was drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study 1988; the sample consisted of 300 students randomly drawn from unweighted groups of White, Hispanic, and African American students. This study reinforced the contributions of mentoring and community involvement for all sub-groups of students and also highlighted the generally indirect nature of their influences on eighth-grade predisposition. For African American students, the circuitous route of effects ran from community involvement and educational mentoring to grades, to parental expectations, and lastly to predisposition. The study also reinforced the central role of parental expectations on students' early decisions regarding college. (Contains 18 references.) (CH)

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Community Activities, Educational Mentors, and College Predisposition Decisions of White, African American, and Hispanic Eighth Graders

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Community Activities, Educational Mentors, and College Predisposition Decisions of White, African American, and Hispanic Eighth Graders

Abstract:

Various personal and educational factors impact students' early predisposition to college attendance. Qualitative studies of minority and low income students' college decision making processes have identified two additional influences: the impacts of teachers and other adults as educational mentors and students' involvement within their communities. This study incorporated measures of these factors along with other more established variables in order to test the efficacy of this combination of influences on students' predisposition to college. Community activities were found to have significant indirect effects on college predisposition in all student subgroups, while having educational mentors had indirect effects only in the African American student subgroup. Explained variance in student predisposition to college ranged from 20% for African American students to 61% for White students.

This study tested a causal model of student college predisposition that incorporated traditional measures of influences (parents' education, income, gender, parents' expectations, grades, school activities) as well as two additional influences identified in qualitative studies of pre-college through early college experiences of minority and low income students. The models were examined (1) to examine the impact on explained variance in eighth grade students' college predisposition decisions, and (2) to identify patterns among the selected variables for sub-groups of students.

Related Literature

Student college choice research has focused on factors that influenced students' ultimate decision to attend college. The three-stage Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model described the roughly sequential, student-level phases of determining one's predisposition to college, engaging in a search for colleges to attend, and ultimately choosing the college one will attend. The predisposition phase of the Hossler and Gallagher model, which is influenced generally by family background and school experiences, is the primary focus of this paper.

The predisposition stage has been modeled successfully in quantitative causal analyses to explore various factors that led to students' making decisions to attend college (e.g., Hossler & Stage, 1992). Additional studies have focused on causal relationships and influences that are characteristic of student subgroups based on ethnicity as well as school environment characteristics (Hamrick & Stage, 1998; McDonough, 1997). For example, Hamrick and Stage found that involvement in school activities significantly affected college predisposition for majority group students but not

for minority students, and McDonough identified differences in the educational ethos of different schools that fostered or discouraged college-going among students who attended these schools.

Entwistle (1990) blamed school size for an evolving detachment between young people and their schools. Citing Barker's and Gump's (1964) Big School, Small School, Cotterell (1996) noted the colder, less cohesive climate of large schools and evidence of a distancing from adults as adolescents moved through school. There is evidence that such problems are exacerbated at schools characterized by low income and high minority enrollment that place additional demands on counselors' and teachers' time and minimize the time available for academic and career counseling (McDonough, 1997).

Because engagement in school activities was unrelated to predisposition to college for low income youths in high minority enrollment schools, Hamrick and Stage (1998) speculated that perhaps outside activities such as those related to churches and community clubs would hold more salience. While a few authors have speculated about the link between community based extracurricular activities and academic goals (Marsh, 1994; Schneider, Chang, Hill, Petrin, Riegle-Crumb & Swanson, 1999), with the exception of Swanson (1999) that conjecture goes untested. With this in mind, we extended our exploration of the college predisposition process to include participation in community activities.

Researchers have speculated about the importance of adult-adolescent relationships in supporting students' academic and social success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent, 1989; Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Weiss, 1994). Cotterell (1996) asserted that community youth organizations can play a key role in students' development and provide

opportunities for one-on-one mentoring that are not always available in formal school settings. Other studies (e.g., Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994) have highlighted the importance of community involvement and participation in activities for minority students. They also described the affirming and challenging relationships with family members, friends, and community members and its counterbalancing of the separations that college attendance entails for many students.

Additionally, studies of college bound students' experiences have identified the importance of educational mentors to students' college-going decisions. In his study of Mexican American first year students, Attinasi (1989) described the importance of teachers and other adults in affecting what he called students' "getting ready" behaviors. Similarly, Levine and Nidiffer (1996) stressed the importance of mentors and networks of mentors (including teachers and other adult relatives or friends) who took a sustained interest in students' educational achievement and provided encouragement or enabled students' college attendance. In various ways, these educational mentors removed barriers or smoothed students' paths to and through college.

Research suggests that status as a first generation prospective college student further complicates a student's situation and decision-making about postsecondary education. Billson and Brooks-Terry (1982) found that family financial resources are fewer with less support often available to actualize the student's plans. Furthermore, while parents can provide valuable encouragement, parents cannot themselves be role models or sources of college information (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; Bouse & Hossler, 1991). This suggests that student participation in community and school

activities where educational mentors and models may be found might be particularly important influences for students who are becoming predisposed to college attendance.

In summary, conceptualizing the predisposition decision has been made more complex by the addition of studies highlighting influences of educational mentors and participation in community activities. This study tested a model of college predisposition that incorporated variables approximating the impacts of educational mentors and community participation to determine whether these additions would add to greater understanding of college predisposition influences.

Methods and Analysis

The model was specified using variables from the National Educational Longitudinal Study:88 base year student data. The NELS data set is a nationally representative collection of student-, school-, teacher-, and parent-level data for almost 25,000 respondents. The base year data represents the students' eighth grade year. See Appendix A for a list of variables used in this study. The selected variables included family income, parents' expectations for the student's education, gender, race/ethnicity, 6^{th}-8^{th} grade composite grades, 8^{th} grade school activities (sum of participation in 21 school-sponsored activities), and community participation (sum of participation in 10 community activities).

Because first generation student status was also of interest in this study, the available base year socioeconomic status variable was not used since it had been constructed using parents' education as well as income. Instead, a dichotomous variable to identify student status as first generation was created through use of an existing variable specifying mother's and father's education. First generation students were

identified as those cases in which neither parent had attended a postsecondary educational institution. Family income was a separate variable, although it was specified as correlated with first generation status in the model. Additionally, a mentoring variable was constructed that summed 8th grade contacts with teachers or adults (including adult relatives) about education-related issues such as course selection, academic improvement, and high school information. Means and standard deviations of all variables are contained in Table 1.

In constructing the model, the exogenous variables included family income, first generation college status (correlated with family income), and gender. Because many of the community involvements were ones in which students could have become involved well before their 8th grade year, community activities was also specified as an exogenous variable. Endogenous variables were parents' expectations, grades, school activities, educational mentors, and the outcome variable of predisposition to college.

Student cases for which data were available on variables of interest were selected, and samples of 300 were drawn randomly from the groups of Anglo (unweighted n= 11,548), Hispanic (unweighted n= 1938), and African American students (unweighted n= 1633). In this way, ranges and variances associated with the large sample sizes were preserved while extremely high and potentially misleading significances associated with large sample sizes could be minimized. Sample means for each of the variables and respective subsample means were compared, and no statistically significant discrepancies existed. Weighted[1] variances and covariances among variables for each of the three groups were entered into the analysis program AMOS 3.6 (part of SPSS 8.0) in order to test the fit of the model to each respective data set. For reasons that are presented in the

Results section below, it became necessary to analyze the Hispanic male and female data separately, resulting in four final models instead of the planned three.

Each of the models was analyzed with respect to critical ratios and modification indices to determine path significance levels and model fit. Model significance levels, chi square to degrees of freedom ratios, and calculated goodness of fit indices were consulted in evaluating each of the models, and the fit of each reduced path model presented here was judged to be good.[2]

Results

Table 2 shows the total effects of the variables in each model on the outcome variable of predisposition to college, and the appended Figures 1-4 show graphic depictions of the four models, including significant paths and explained variance. In the following summary discussion of each model, significant direct and indirect effects are noted.

White students: The reduced path model for White students' predisposition to college (see Figure 1) indicated community activities indirectly affected predisposition through effects on parental expectations and school activities, but contacts with educational mentors had no significant effect on any other variable in the model. Having at least one college-experienced parent was correlated with engaging in community activities as well as school activities. While participation in community activities led to more interactions with educational mentors, these interactions had no subsequent effect on college predisposition. Four of the five exogenous variables (i.e., non-first generation

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[1] NCES-calculated cross-sectional weightings.
[2] Model for White stds.: Chi-square (df=19)=20.8. p=.345. GFI=.986, AGFI=.967, RMR=.12.
Model for African American stds.: Chi-square (df=24)=27.3. p=.293. GFI=.981, AGFI=.965, RMR=.13.
Model for Hispanic female stds.: Chi-square (df=16)=16.23. p=.437. GFI=.976, AGFI=.945, RMR=.18.

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status, high family income, being female, and high participation in community activities) had significant positive effects on parental expectations. Parental expectations also were significantly affected by two other endogenous variables (i.e., high grades and low participation in school activities). While lower participation in school activities significantly affected parents' expectations (and, in turn, significantly affected college predisposition), higher school activities participation also directly affected predisposition to college. In all, 31% of the variance in parental expectations was explained by this model. The model also explained 61% of the total variance in White students' predisposition to college.

African American students: Fewer causal paths were significant in the African American students' model (see Figure 2), which explained 20% of the variance in college predisposition. Although community activities participation and contacts with educational mentors both indirectly affected predisposition, the model accounted for less than one-third of the variance the model explained for White students. Three of the exogenous variables (having at least one college-educated parent, high family income, and being female) had direct effects on student grades. However, only one of the exogenous variables (family income) and two endogenous variables (grades and school activities) affected parental expectations which in turn was significantly related to college predisposition. By itself, having at least one college-educated parent had direct effects on students' predisposition to college. African American students' community involvement led to increased educational mentor contacts, and these contacts as well as community involvement each affected school activities participation.

Model for Hispanic male stds.: Chi-square (df=18)=12.592. p=.815. GFI=.977, AGFI=.954, RMR=.20.

Hispanic Students

The test of the model for Hispanic student data resulted in a poor model fit with respect to chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio, calculated model significance level, and goodness of fit ratios. Analysis of the poor model fit revealed possible differential gender patterns with respect to the influence of the exogenous variables of income, parents' education, and community activities on college predisposition. Following the initial analysis, the model was then tested on two separate data sets—Hispanic males and Hispanic females—to determine whether the models achieved stability and whether distinct patterns existed. The reduced path models for Hispanic males and females subsequently met goodness of fit criteria, which were presented in an earlier footnote.

Hispanic female students: Among Hispanic females, having at least one college-educated parent, parents' expectations, and grades had direct effects on predisposition to college (see Figure 3). Community involvement and grades also had indirect effects on predisposition through their effects on, respectively, grades and parents' expectations. Although community activities and grades also significantly affected participation in school activities, school activities participation had no subsequent effect on predisposition. Students' participation in community activities was found to correlate positively with family income. Community involvement led higher educational mentoring contacts but these contacts had no significant effect on predisposition. This model successfully explained a high proportion of the variance (57%) in students' school activities participation, but such participation had no effect on predisposition. Additionally, the only role for family income in the model was its correlation with the other exogenous variables of community activities and first generation student status. The

total variance explained in Hispanic females students' college predisposition decisions was 37%.

Hispanic male students: In contrast, the model explained slightly more (44%) of the variance in Hispanic male students' predisposition decisions and a different pattern of causal paths was identified (see Figure 4). Like Hispanic females, community involvement among Hispanic males positively affected educational mentoring contacts and involvement in school activities, and neither of these variables subsequently affected students' predisposition decisions. Unlike Hispanic females, the effects of community involvement on college predisposition were mediated through parents' expectations instead of grades, and Hispanic males' grades had no effect on participation in school activities. Additionally, no significant correlation existed between family income and community activities participation for Hispanic males. Having at least one parent with postsecondary education experience affected predisposition indirectly through parents' expectations, and grades also significantly affected parents' expectations. Like all other subgroups of students, grades for Hispanic males significantly affected their college predisposition. But, unlike any other student subgroup, none of the exogenous variables (parents' education, family income, community involvement, or educational mentors) had a significant effect on Hispanic male students' grades.

Discussion and Implications

This study incorporated variables suggested by qualitative studies on low income and minority group students' pre-college and college experiences to explore how community involvement and educational mentoring contacts with teachers and adults affected students' college predisposition decisions. We hypothesized that incorporating

these variables into a model of college predisposition would better explain the variance associated with predisposition and reveal additional dynamics associated with that decision—particularly among minority and prospective first generation students. However, based on analyses of the four models from this study, the explained variance in college predisposition was by far higher in the model for White students. Further, the model using White student data also included more significant causal paths related to these two variables that did the models for any of the three minority student groups. Being a prospective first generation student was not related definitively with either of these two added variables.

There are several possible explanations for this, each of which also constitute limitations of this study. First, the operationalized variables for mentoring and community activities each were broadly summative in terms of numbers and frequencies up to and including the eighth grade year. It is possible that differences in timing, nature, and intensity of educational mentoring and community involvement may be more critical among certain groups of students. For example, among African American students the decision to go to college is made later on average (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Additionally, one of the students in Attinasi's (1989) study recalled an instance in which a high school teacher drew distinctions between high school and college academic expectations. This memorable event happened during her high school experience, and it only happened one time—perhaps offhandedly, in one class. However, the experience was meaningful for her.

The analysis presented here provides an approximation of general effects of these variables on the predisposition decision, but this analysis does not challenge the

understanding of educational mentoring as complex and differentially meaningful among students. While successful mentoring may certainly involve amount, frequency, or consistency of contact, it may depend more critically on fortuitous timing and student readiness to be mentored. In other words, the quantitative measures employed here do not account for subtle aspects of human contact that may be critical to students' educational decision-making.

Among Hispanic students, community involvement directly or indirectly was related to parents' expectations, but participation in school activities did not have the similar effect. In fact, participation in school activities had no effect on the outcome variable of college predisposition among Hispanic male or female students, echoing prior findings of Hamrick and Stage (1998). In the current study, this finding regarding involvement explains more about the influences of the students' community involvement on parents than directly on the students' decisions, but parents' expectations continued to be a strong indicator of Hispanic students' predisposition. Support for Hispanic students' predisposition to college may therefore be grounded in a shared base of parents and community members. However, educational mentoring from teachers and other adults that was significantly related to community involvement and, among Hispanic males, affected by parents' education, did not contribute significantly to the students' college predisposition decision.

Among African American students and Hispanic females, having at least one college-educated parent had a greater impact on the predisposition decision than did family income. This may be evidence of intergenerational effects of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) as well as a reflection of current sociological research suggesting that

household assets, lifestyle, and values make a greater difference in the life aspirations of children than does parents' earned income (McDonough, 1997). This finding was not the case among Hispanic males, where family income and not parents' education directly affected their college predisposition.

In many ways, this study reinforced the contributions of mentoring and community involvement and also highlighted the generally indirect nature of their influences on eighth grade predisposition. In the case of African American students, for example, the circuitous route of effects ran from community involvement and educational mentoring to grades, to parents' expectations, and then lastly to predisposition. This path is indicative of the myriad influences and complexities associated with college predisposition decisions. Additionally, this study has reinforced the central role of parental expectations on students' early decisions regarding college.

However, many questions remain. Although many studies identifying the importance of community involvement and educational mentoring focused on minority and/or low income students' experiences, this study found that a predisposition model incorporating these influences explained more total variance in the predisposition decision for the White student subgroup than among the minority student subgroups. Disaggregating the data by ethnicity revealed differences in patterns and effects, but more variance in predisposition remains unaccounted for in the minority student group models. This predisposition model predicts best for White students and reveals little about the relevant predisposition influences and dynamics for minority group students. Further research is needed to discover characteristic sources of influence and contributions to predisposition decisions. Additionally, more detailed research on the ways in which

parents foster and affirm educational expectations for their children and how these expectations can best be reinforced in homes, schools, and communities will be an important contribution to research and practice.

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Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations

Subgroups:	White Students		African American Students		Hispanic Female Students		Hispanic Male Students	
Variables	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Parents' Education (First Generation)	.58	.49	.48	.50	.27	.44	.38	.49
Family Income	10.20	2.25	7.78	2.92	7.94	2.93	8.30	2.72
Gender	1.51	.50	1.50	.50	-	-	-	-
Parents' Expectations	9.792	2.258	9.829	2.010	9.461	2.304	9.184	2.551
Composite Grades	2.960	.766	2.695	.689	2.841	.666	2.718	.737
School Activities	2.869	2.331	3.679	3.430	3.193	3.005	3.048	3.013
Community Involvement	1.928	1.679	2.661	2.670	1.820	1.919	1.705	1.947
Educational Mentors	4.818	2.676	5.782	2.566	5.585	2.388	4.971	2.843
Predisposition to College	4.69	1.36	4.60	1.23	4.12	1.29	4.26	1.44

Table 2: Covariance Tables

White Students

Variables:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Parents' Education	.244								
2. Family Income	.387	5.073							
3. Gender	.013	.006	.250						
4. Parents' Expectations	.401	2.201	.159	5.100					
5. Composite Grades	.102	.448	.004	.558	.587				
6. School Activities	.232	.360	.057	-.085	.445	5.437			
7. Community Involvement	.119	.252	.027	.560	.070	1.174	2.820		
8. Educational Mentors	-.061	-.558	.074	.343	.010	.507	1.012	7.160	
9. Predisposition to College	.245	1.241	.060	2.117	.559	.691	.334	.409	1.843

African American Students

Variables:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Parents' Education	.250								
2. Family Income	.497	8.548							
3. Gender	.008	-.023	.250						
4. Parents' Expectations	.152	1.260	.131	4.034					
5. Composite Grades	.090	.512	.078	.254	.474				
6. School Activities	-.150	-.204	-.0003	.905	.009	11.759			
7. Community Involvement	-.009	-.483	-.070	.226	-.080	3.523	5.152		
8. Educational Mentors	.036	-.229	.105	-.280	.081	1.602	.934	6.582	
9. Predisposition to College	.109	.674	.064	1.070	.139	.454	.318	.004	1.514

Hispanic Females

Variables:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parents' Education	.195							
2. Family Income	.441	8.562						
3. Parents' Expectations	.250	.506	5.308					
4. Composite Grades	.028	.271	.300	.443				
5. School Activities	-.084	1.140	.392	.540	9.029			
6. Community Involvement	.0216	1.146	.347	.268	4.321	3.681		
7. Educational Mentors	-.084	-.358	.392	.540	2.107	1.489	5.703	
8. Predisposition to College	.168	.243	1.561	.323	.435	.437	.161	1.675

Hispanic Males

Variables:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Parents' Education	.235							
2. Family Income	.474	7.401						
3. Parents' Expectations	.346	.551	6.509					
4. Composite Grades	.008	.244	.485	.544				
5. School Activities	.083	.318	.636	.312	9.075			
6. Community Involvement	.068	.030	1.008	.088	2.361	3.790		
7. Educational Mentors	.262	.903	.493	.146	1.584	1.197	8.080	
8. Predisposition to College	.158	.909	1.970	.538	.106	.449	.316	2.086

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Table 3: Significant Direct and Indirect Effects on Predisposition to College

Variables	White Students	African Amer. Students	Hispanic Students*	Hispanic Males	Hispanic Females
Family income	.160	.037	.023	.081	ns
Gender	.211	.031	-.239	-	-
Community activities	.095	.014	.039	.053	.050
First generation	.587	.308	.684	.332	.764
Educational mentors	ns	.003	ns	ns	.016
School activities	.078	.020	ns	ns	ns
Composite grades	.783	.102	.839	.939	.681
Parents' expectations	.357	.255	.233	.241	.241

*Unstable model; data subsequently reanalyzed by gender.
ns=non-significant effect in reduced path model.

Appendix A: List of Variables

Parents' College Education: 0 'Neither parent attended a postsecondary educational institution' 1 'Either parent attended a postsecondary educational institution.' This dichotomous variable was constructed from base year data on mother's and father's education levels.

Family Income: Ordinal variable of annual income. Fifteen levels from 1 'none' to 15 '$200,000 or more.

Gender: 1 'Male' 2 'Female'

Race/Ethnicity: 1 'Asian, Pacific Islander' 2 'Hispanic' 3 'African American, not Hispanic' 4 'White, not Hispanic'

Parents' Expectations is the sum of Father's and Mother's postsecondary expectations for the student: 1 'less than H.S. graduation' 2 'graduate H.S.' 3 'Vocational, trade, business school' 4 'attend college' 5 'graduate from college' 6 'higher school after college'

Composite Grades: Average of 6^{th}-8^{th} grade English, Math, Science, and Social Studies grades. Range .5 (failing) to 4.0 (A).

School Activities: Sum of participation in the following 21 activities: science fairs, varsity sports, intramural sports, cheerleading, band or orchestra, chorus or choir, dance, history club, science club, math club, foreign language club, other subject matter club, debate or speech team, drama club, academic honor society, student newspaper, student yearbook, student council, computer club, religious organization, vocational education club.

Community Involvement: Sum of participation in the following 10 activities: scouting, religious youth groups, hobby clubs, neighborhood clubs or programs, boys' clubs or girls' clubs, non-school team sports, 4-H, Y or other youth groups, summer programs such as workshops or institutes, other.

Educational Mentors: Sum of interactions during 8^{th} grade year with counselors, teachers, and adult relatives or adult friends about the following topics: high school information or high school programs, job or career information, academic work improvement, academic course or program selection, class topical material.

Predisposition to College: 1 'won't finish H.S.' 2 'will finish H.S.' 3 'Vocational, trade, or business school' 4 'will attend college' 5 'will finish college' 6 'higher school after college'

Figure 1:

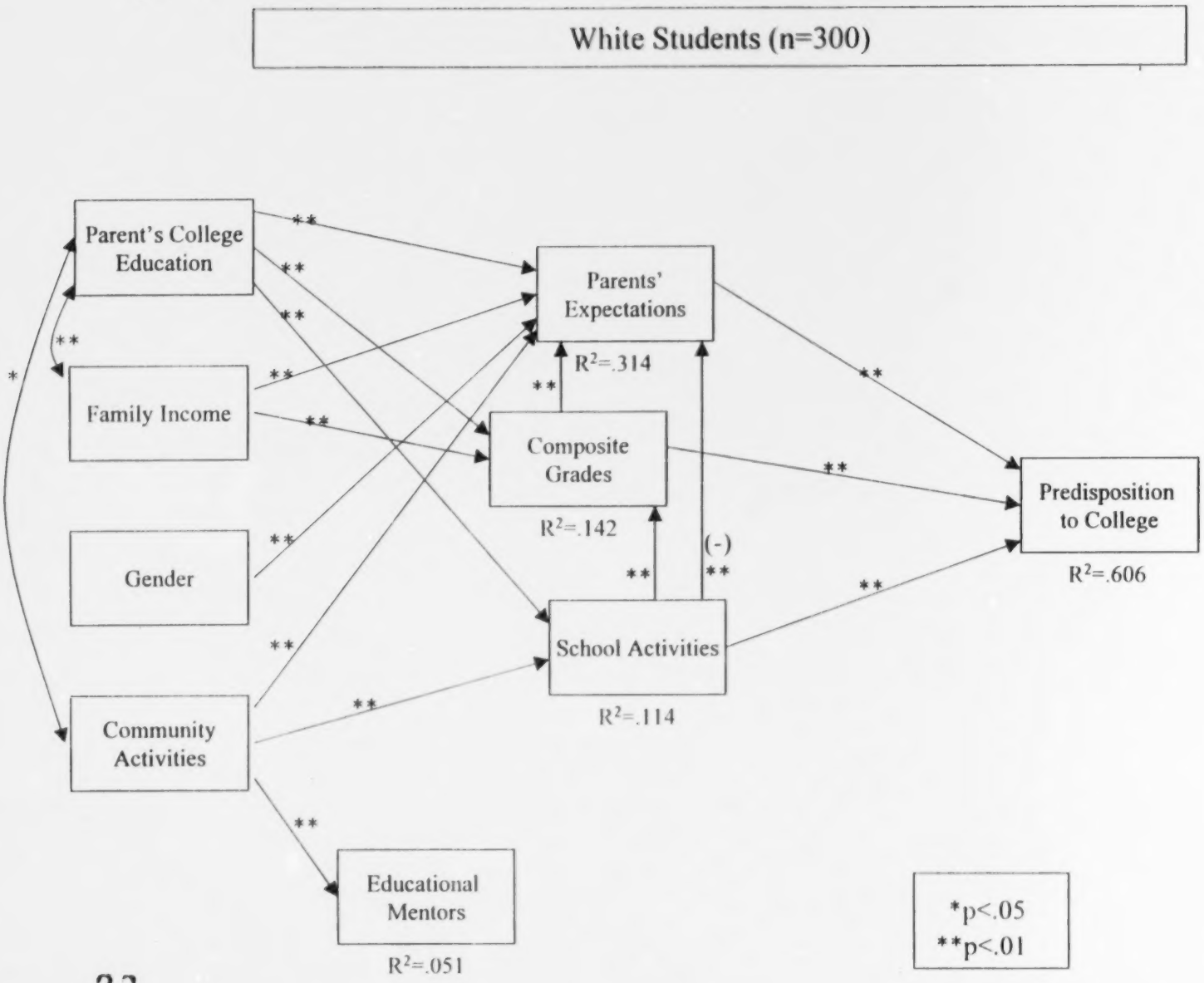

White Students (n=300)
Parent's College Education
Family Income
Gender
Community Activities
Parents' Expectations
R^2=.314
Composite Grades
R^2=.142
School Activities
R^2=.114
Predisposition to College
R^2=.606
Educational Mentors
R^2=.051
(-)
*p<.05
**p<.01

Figure 2:

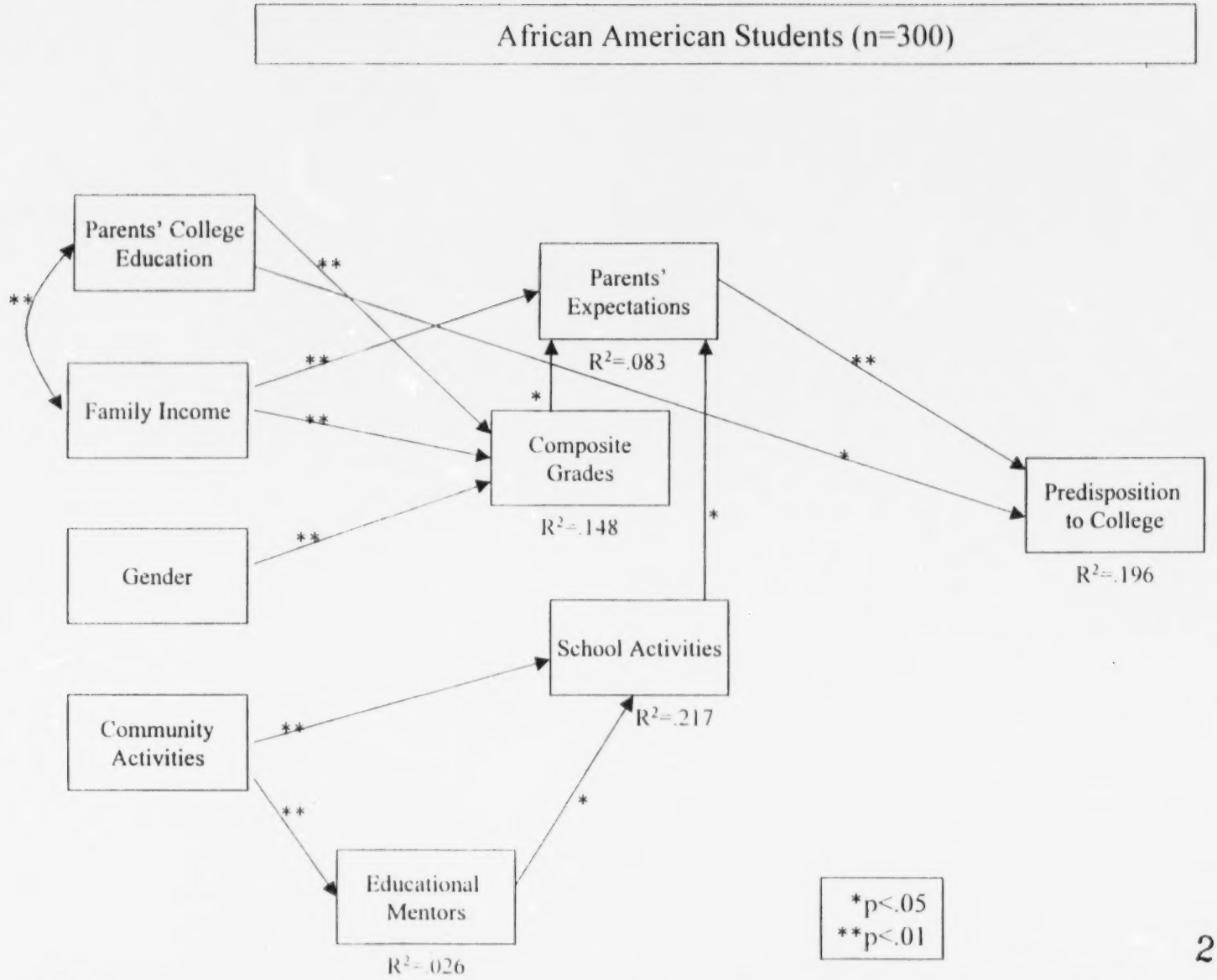

African American Students (n=300)
Parents' College Education
Family Income
Gender
Community Activities
Parents' Expectations
R^2=.083
Composite Grades
R^2=.148
School Activities
R^2=.217
Educational Mentors
R^2=.026
Predisposition to College
R^2=.196
*p<.05
**p<.01

Figure 3:

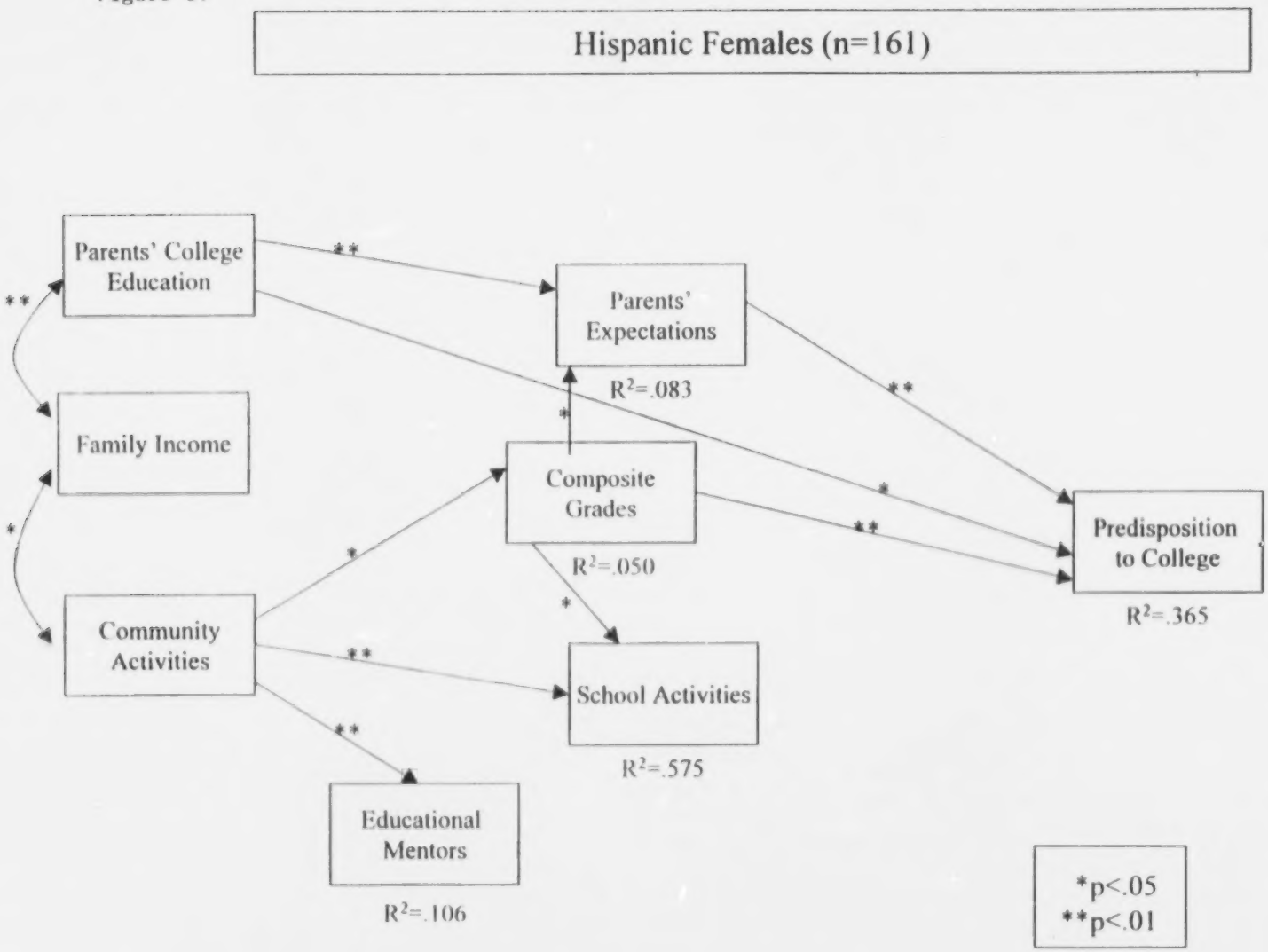
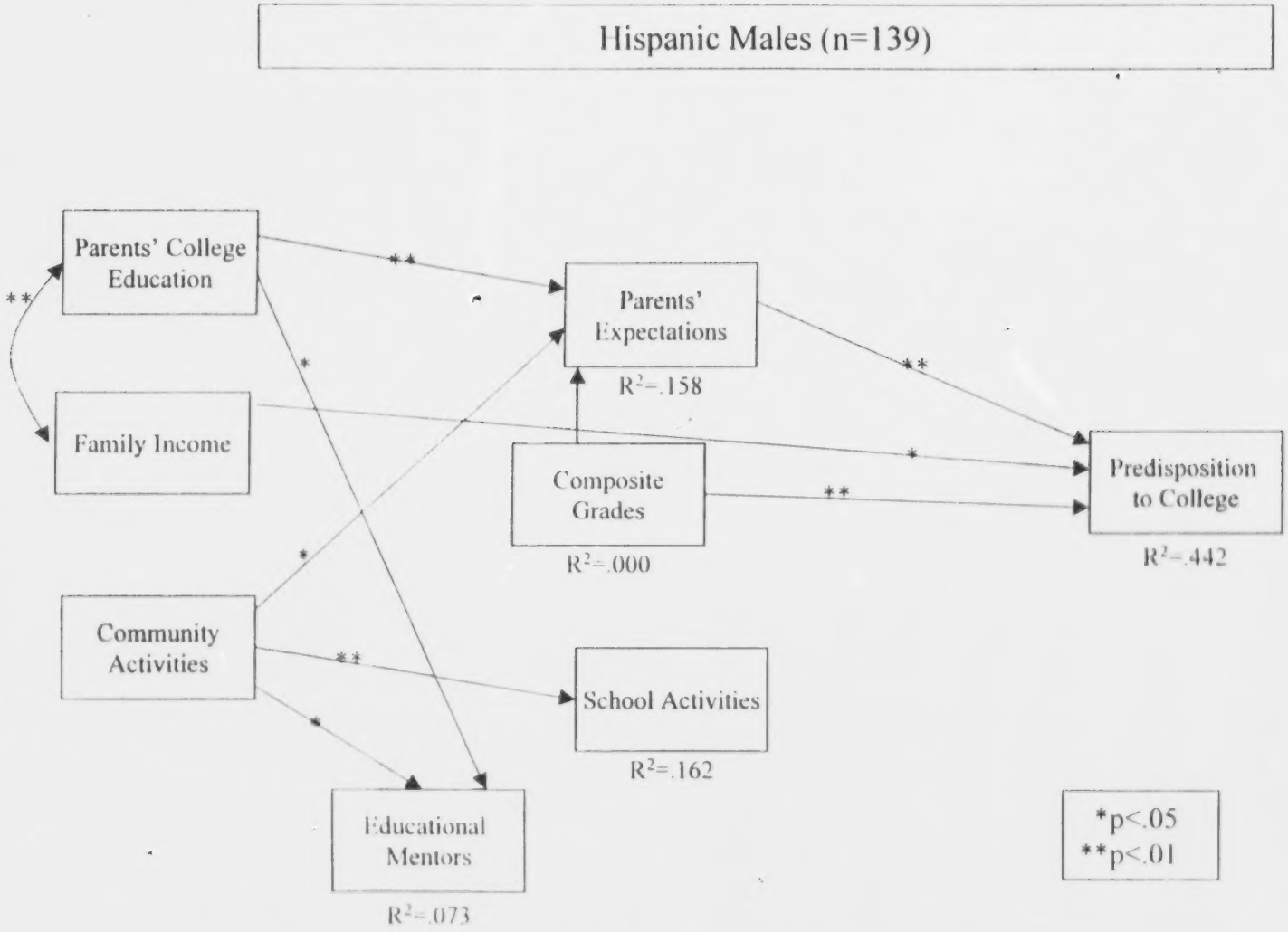

Hispanic Females (n=161)
Parents' College Education
Parents' Expectations
R²=.083
Family Income
Composite Grades
R²=.050
Predisposition to College
R²=.365
Community Activities
School Activities
R²=.575
Educational Mentors
R²=.106
*p<.05
**p<.01

Figure 4:


Hispanic Males (n=139)
Parents' College Education
Family Income
Community Activities
Parents' Expectations
R^2=.158
Composite Grades
R^2=.000
Predisposition to College
R^2=.442
School Activities
R^2=.162
Educational Mentors
R^2=.073
*p<.05
**p<.01